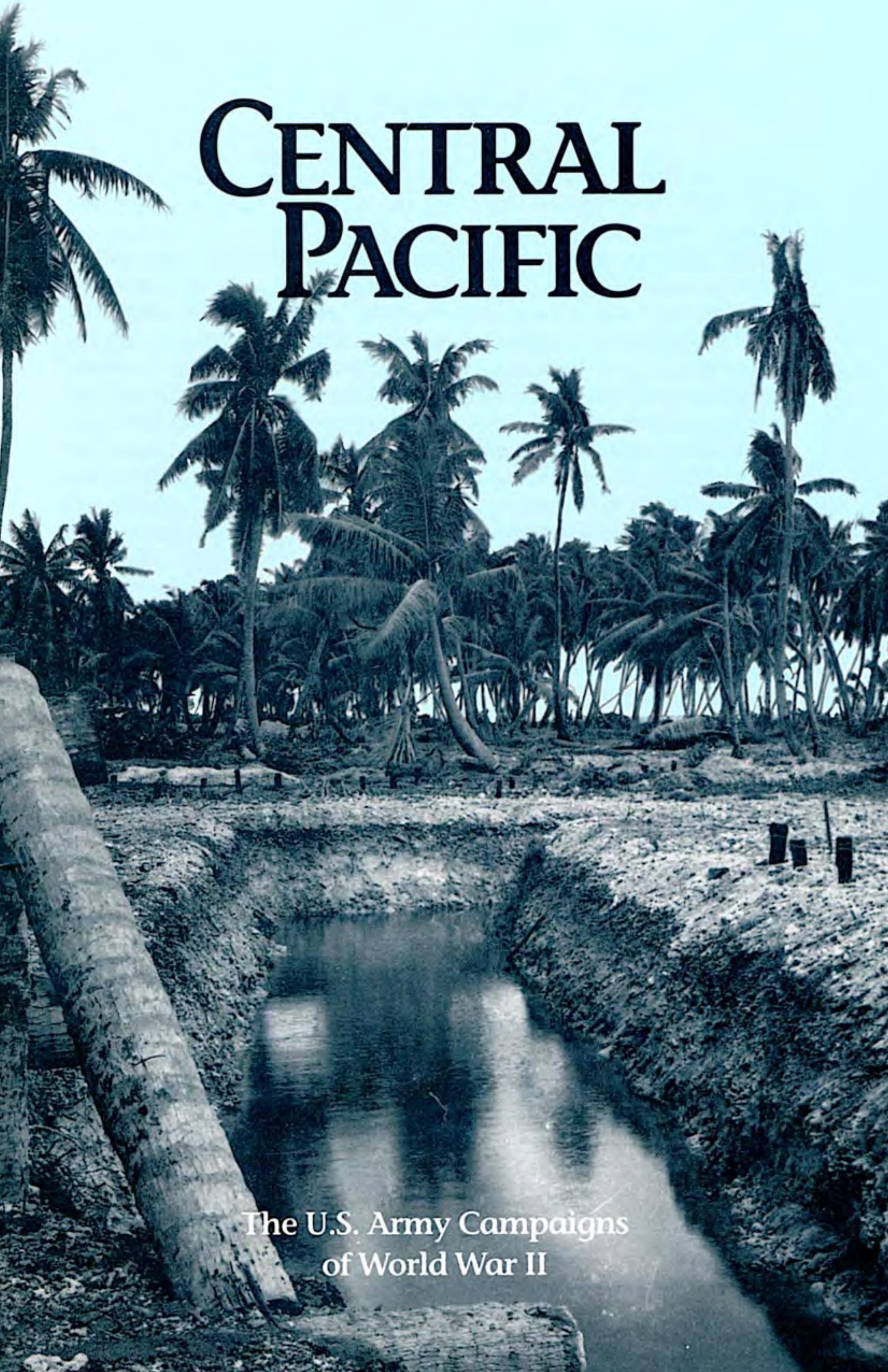
CENTRAL PACIFIC



The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II

Introduction

World War II was the largest and most violent armed conflict in the history of mankind. However, the half century that now separates us from that conflict has exacted its toll on our collective knowledge. While World War II continues to absorb the interest of military scholars and historians, as well as its veterans, a generation of Americans has grown to maturity largely unaware of the political, social, and military implications of a war that, more than any other, united us as a people with a common purpose.

Highly relevant today, World War II has much to teach us, not only about the profession of arms, but also about military preparedness, global strategy, and combined operations in the coalition war against fascism. During the next several years, the U.S. Army will participate in the nation's 50th anniversary commemoration of World War II. The commemoration will include the publication of various materials to help educate Americans about that war. The works produced will provide great opportunities to learn about and renew pride in an Army that fought so magnificently in what has been called "the mighty endeavor."

World War II was waged on land, on sea, and in the air over several diverse theaters of operation for approximately six years. The following essay is one of a series of campaign studies highlighting those struggles that, with their accompanying suggestions for further reading, are designed to introduce you to one of the Army's significant military feats from that war.

This brochure was prepared in the U.S. Army Center of Military History by Lt. Col. Clayton R. Newell. I hope this absorbing account of that period will enhance your appreciation of American achievements during World War II.

M. P. W. Stone
Secretary of the Army

Central Pacific

7 December 1941-6 December 1943

The Central Pacific Campaign opened abruptly on 7 December 1941, when carrier-based planes of the *Japanese Imperial Navy* launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. At the time it was widely believed that the heart of the U.S. Pacific Fleet had been rendered ineffective since the Japanese aircraft had destroyed or damaged the fleet's eight battleships. As the war unfolded in the Pacific, however, the Navy turned to its aircraft carriers—all of which had been at sea on 7 December—as the capital ships that would carry the war to the enemy. Although the assault on Pearl Harbor was but one of many virtually simultaneous attacks by the Japanese armed forces against the United States and its Allies in the Pacific, it was the one that struck a nerve in the American public and prompted President Franklin D. Roosevelt to demand, and receive, an immediate declaration of war from Congress. To declare war is one thing, but to carry the fight to the enemy is quite another. Almost two years would pass before U.S. Army forces tangled with the *Japanese Army* in the last weeks of the Central Pacific Campaign.

Strategic Setting

Most of the Central Pacific Campaign took place in Micronesia, an area of the globe larger than the continental United States, where a multitude of islands lie scattered about a vast expanse of ocean. Clustered into four major groups, these Pacific islands have a landmass of about 1,200 square miles, an area somewhat larger than the state of Rhode Island. The most easterly of the four island groups are the Gilberts, low-lying coral atolls, straddling the equator just west of the international date line. North and west of the Gilberts are the Marshall Islands, a double chain of atolls, reefs, and islets, most of which rise only a few feet above sea level. Stretching almost due west from the Marshalls are the 550 tiny islands of the Caroline group. The Marianas lie just north of the Carolines in a 400-mile north-south chain.

Strategically located across the main sea lines of communications between the United States and the Philippines, the islands of Micronesia played a vital role in Japanese war plans. Japan had seized

the Carolines, Marshalls, and Marianas (except Guam) from Germany during World War I, retaining control afterward under a mandate from the League of Nations. Its forces had occupied the rest—Guam and the Gilberts—in the course of their initial offensive at the outbreak of war. Once garrisoned, these islands provided Japan an outer perimeter for its expanding empire and put its forces in an excellent strategic position to cut Allied lines of communications.

The Central Pacific was equally important to the United States as the path of military advance postulated in the ORANGE plans developed by the Joint Board, composed of planners from the Army General Staff and the General Board of the Navy, during the 1920s and 1930s. According to these plans, in the event of war with Japan the U.S. Pacific Fleet would move from Pearl Harbor to seize selected islands in Micronesia in a methodical advance toward the Philippines, projecting American military and naval strength ever westward. Although few officers truly believed it, the ORANGE plans assumed that the American forces garrisoning the Philippines could hold Manila Bay for up to six months while the Pacific Fleet and its accompanying ground forces conducted an island-by-island advance.

By 1938 it was apparent to American planners that the assumptions forming the basis of the ORANGE plans were rapidly becoming invalid. Working in coordination with the British, they concluded that in the event of a global war the United States would probably face Japan alone in the Pacific. While the U.S. Navy took the view that winning the war in the Pacific should be the nation's first priority, Army planners argued that in a war with both Japan and Germany the largely naval war in the Pacific had to remain an economy-of-force, or defensive, theater. The Army view prevailed. When American planners completed the RAINBOW series of plans in June 1939, each plan assumed that in a future war the United States would face a coalition rather than a single enemy military power. In the event, RAINBOW 5 came closest to what actually happened: it envisioned a rapid projection of American forces across the Atlantic to defeat Germany, Italy, or both, and by clear implication relegated the Pacific to a defensive theater.

The adoption of a defensive strategy in the Pacific did not necessarily mean inaction. On the contrary, from the earliest days of the Pacific war, American forces struck the Japanese whenever and wherever they could with the meager resources available. As early as April 1942, American planes took the war to the heart of the Japanese Empire with a surprise air attack on Tokyo. Although the daring raid did little more than provide a boost to sagging American

morale, it put the government of Japan on notice that the American war effort in the Pacific, even though a secondary priority for the United States in global terms, was still going to be an all-out effort. As the campaign in the Central Pacific got under way, however, at least one well-intentioned early offensive produced some unexpected and, from the U.S. Army's perspective, undesirable results.

Operations

According to the War Department organization in place at the end of 1941, the Hawaiian Department of the Army had responsibility for the defense of the Hawaiian Islands. It reported directly to the War Department and was the highest Army command in the Pacific. Major subordinate commands under the Hawaiian Department included the Hawaiian Air Force and the 24th and 25th Infantry Divisions. Although both divisions would play prominent roles in the Pacific war and were part of Hawaii's defenses during the Pearl Harbor attack, they did not actually participate in the ground combat in the Central Pacific.

Operations Plan RAINBOW 5 outlined a joint Army-Navy mission to defend the island of Oahu, site of the Navy's Pearl Harbor base and the Army's Wheeler and Hickam Airfields. The plan specifically charged the Army's Hawaiian Department with defending Oahu against attack; protecting against sabotage and other internal strife; supporting naval forces in the protection of Allied sea lines of communications; and conducting offensive operations against Axis sea lines of communications within the tactical operating radius of all American air bases. To implement these responsibilities the Hawaiian Department developed three stages of alert. The department was at the lowest stage of alert—Alert 1, defense against sabotage, espionage, and subversive activities—when the Japanese planes from a naval task force standing 200 miles north of Oahu launched the attack on Hawaii. The Japanese assault took place between 0750 and 1000, bombing the U.S. Pacific Fleet, which, except for the carriers, was in its home port at Pearl Harbor near Honolulu. Of the 8 battleships moored neatly along battleship row, 3 were sunk, 1 capsized, and the other 4 were damaged. In addition serious damage occurred to 3 cruisers, 3 destroyers, and a variety of other vessels. Army Air Forces planes, aligned in close formation at Hickam and Wheeler Airfields, also provided lucrative targets. Attacks on those facilities resulted in losses of 92 Navy and 96 Army planes. American casualties from the Japanese bombing totaled 2,280 killed and 1,109 wounded. Japanese



"Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941" by Richard W. Baldwin. The surprise Japanese attack inflicted a stunning blow and brought the United States into World War II. (Army Art Collection)

losses were a comparatively insignificant 29 planes and 5 midget submarines. At the end of the first day of what would eventually be designated the Central Pacific Campaign, the United States had been dealt a stunning blow to its military and naval prowess. The Japanese, however, failed to administer the knockout punch.

One of the first American reactions to the Pearl Harbor debacle was a major shakeup in the Pacific command structure. In a belated effort to achieve unity of command ten days after the Japanese attack, all Army units in the area, including the headquarters of the Hawaiian Department, were placed under the operational control of the Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet. About the same time, the Pacific Fleet and the Hawaiian Department and its air force received new commanders. But reorganization and new faces at the top could not disguise the fact that the sudden arrival of war had left American war plans in serious disarray.

With the Japanese on the offensive throughout the Pacific, the United States could do little but watch as Allied strongpoints fell one by one: Wake Island was overwhelmed on 23 December 1941; the British garrison at Hong Kong surrendered on Christmas Day; British North Borneo surrendered on 19 January 1942, the surrender of Singapore signaled the end of the Malayan battle on 15 February; and Japanese forces landed virtually unopposed on Dutch New Guinea on 1 April. With the fall of the Philippines on 6 May, the Japanese seriously threatened to achieve their goal of dominating the Pacific basin.

During the Japanese advance, British and American leaders met in Washington to discuss a combined war strategy. President Roo-

sevelt and Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill and their military advisers were in general agreement on how to conduct the war, and the Arcadia Conference, held in Washington from 24 December 1941 to 14 January 1942, was the first of many such sessions where the Allies considered global strategy at the highest political and military levels. Among the major decisions reached at this conference—one that would directly affect the conduct of the Central Pacific Campaign—was confirmation at the highest level that the focus of the Allied war effort would initially be Germany, while the Pacific would remain on the strategic defensive as an economy-of-force theater. On 24 March the new British and American Combined Chiefs of Staff issued a directive designating the Pacific theater an area of U.S. strategic responsibility. Six days later the American Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) divided the Pacific theater into three areas: the Pacific Ocean Area, the Southwest Pacific Area, and the Southeast Pacific Area.

The Joint Chiefs further divided the Pacific Ocean Area (POA), which included the Hawaiian Islands, into the North, Central, and South Pacific Areas. They designated Admiral Chester W. Nimitz Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Area (CINCPOA), with operational control over all units (air, land, and sea) in that area. Nimitz in turn designated subordinate commanders for the North and South Pacific Areas but retained the Central Pacific Area, including the Hawaiian Department, under his direct command. In the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA), General Douglas MacArthur assumed command, but no commander was named for the Southeast Pacific Area. The effective result of this organizational scheme was the creation of two separate commands in the Pacific (POA and SWPA), each reporting separately to the Joint Chiefs, each competing for scarce resources in an economy-of-force theater, and each headed by a commander in chief (CINC) from a different service.

Although the directives to Nimitz and MacArthur were generally alike, there were some fundamental differences. Nimitz was allowed to command naval and land forces in the Pacific Ocean Area directly, while MacArthur was enjoined to act through subordinate commands in the Southwest Pacific Area. The tasks assigned to each commander also differed significantly. MacArthur's assigned mission was essentially defensive, since he was told only to "prepare for the offensive" while defending Australia. Nimitz, while clearly having a defensive mission in the context of the overall economy-of-force role of the Pacific theater, was also instructed to "prepare for the execution of major amphibious offensives." The directive to Nimitz further specified that the initial offensives would be launched

from the South and Southwest Pacific Areas, thus implying that Nimitz would command offensives in MacArthur's area of command. As a result of this somewhat muddled command arrangement, much of the two-year Central Pacific Campaign was marked not by battle with Japan over control of the Pacific but by debates among Nimitz, MacArthur, and the JCS over control of American strategy and forces in the Pacific.

The JCS reached agreement in April 1943 on joint service and unified command matters, but the Central Pacific Area organizational structure did not follow their model. Of particular concern to the Army was that Nimitz was the commander in chief of the Pacific Ocean Area as well as the commander of the Pacific Fleet and the Central Pacific Area. The problem was further compounded by Nimitz's desire to use nearly the same staff while acting in all three capacities. According to the JCS agreement a joint commander, the CINCPOA in this case, was not to assume command of any component of his force unless directed by the Joint Chiefs. Under the arrangements in Pacific Ocean Area, Army ground and air officers had a real concern that their points of view might not receive adequate consideration from what was essentially a Navy staff. This command problem remained relatively benign while the Central Pacific was quiet, but any offensive operations would certainly require clearer command and staff lines.

While the United States organized itself for war, Japan continued to expand its empire. For five months the *Imperial Japanese Navy's Combined Fleet* moved across the Pacific with virtual impunity. After Pearl Harbor it managed to sink 5 Allied battleships, 1 aircraft carrier, 2 cruisers, and 7 destroyers; damage a number of capital ships; and destroy thousands of tons of merchant shipping and fleet auxiliary vessels. The cost to Japanese forces was relatively small: a few planes and experienced pilots from its aircraft carriers; 23 small naval vessels, the largest being a destroyer; and about 60 transports and merchant ships. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander of the *Combined Fleet* and a firm advocate of carrier operations, intended to cap this naval campaign with a decisive blow to the crippled U.S. Pacific Fleet. He proposed coordinated attacks in the Aleutians and on the island of Midway that would force Nimitz into a fleet engagement in the open sea, where the Japanese could finish the job of destroying American naval power they had started at Pearl Harbor. While the Japanese plan included the invasion and occupation of the Aleutian Islands and Midway, the decisive defeat of the U.S. Pacific Fleet was the real goal. As long as the

American fleet remained intact, any Japanese success in Midway or in the Aleutians would be a hollow victory at best.

On 8 May Admiral Yamamoto lost the services of two of his large aircraft carriers during the Battle of the Coral Sea, fought in the Southwest Pacific off the coast of northern Australia. Despite having to send the carriers *Shokoku* and *Zuikoku* back to the shipyards for major repairs after the battle, Yamamoto still had at his disposal the most formidable naval force the Japanese had assembled since Pearl Harbor. The main body of this fleet consisted of a carrier force (the 4 large carriers *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Hiryu*, and *Soryu*) and an attack force (3 battleships, which included Yamamoto's flagship *Yamato*, a light carrier, tenders and other vessels, and a screen of 16 submarines). These forces, oriented against Midway, were supported by numerous combat and support ships. A separate force, built around 2 more carriers, was positioned far to the north for an invasion of the Aleutians. By late May the Japanese plans were in place and the *Combined Fleet* steamed forth to do battle with the Pacific Fleet.

The Pacific Fleet in May 1942, however, was not the same naval force the Japanese had caught by surprise at Pearl Harbor. Even though its performance in the Coral Sea was far from flawless, the U.S. Navy had tasted at least partial victory and discovered that its enemy was not invulnerable. Still, the odds heavily favored the Japanese because in any encounter Admiral Nimitz could marshal only a limited force. Two of his aircraft carriers had been hit in the Battle of the Coral Sea: the *Lexington* went to the bottom, and the *Yorktown* suffered serious damage. The fleet's battleships were still on the west coast of the United States, and although the carriers *Saratoga* and *Wasp* were on orders for the Pacific they would not arrive until late June, too late to help counter the Japanese move. Nimitz spent the rest of May assembling what naval forces he could. The only carriers ready at Pearl Harbor were the *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, but the heavily damaged *Yorktown* arrived on 28 May, and repair crews working around the clock miraculously readied it for action in two days. Faced with the disparity in strength, Nimitz put much emphasis on the carriers. He hoped to avoid a surface engagement with the more powerful enemy, preferring that the outcome of the battle be decided on the basis of air power. By the end of the month Nimitz put to sea with a force of 3 carriers, 1 light and 7 heavy cruisers, 13 destroyers, and 25 submarines. On 3 June he was 200 miles north of Midway, waiting for the Japanese fleet.

The Japanese had enjoyed some success in their attacks on the Aleutians, but at Midway they met disaster. To win this climactic en-

counter, they were depending on a surprise attack as they had at Pearl Harbor six months before. What they did not know was that American cryptologists had broken their naval codes. As a result Nimitz was able to turn the tables and surprise the Japanese fleet. The Pacific Fleet found the Japanese carrier force on 4 June, shortly after it had launched its aircraft to attack the U.S. garrison and airfield on Midway. U.S. Navy carrier-based aircraft along with Army and Marine aircraft flying from airfields on the island attacked the closely bunched Japanese carriers. The *Akagi, Kaga*, and *Soryu*, especially vulnerable since their air cover had flown off to attack Midway, were all fatally hit and sunk or abandoned. The fourth carrier, *Hiryu*, managed to launch a lethal attack on the *Yorktown*, but it too was abandoned by its crew after being hit by American dive-bombers.

Even though Yamamoto's attack force and his Aleutian force were still intact, he had been outmaneuvered and outsmarted and could not bring his battleships into play. The loss of four carriers with all their planes and pilots was a blow from which the Japanese would never fully recover. The Battle of Midway effectively turned the Japanese strategic offensive into a strategic defense and pushed open the door to the Central Pacific. It would be some time, however, before the United States would actually enter that door, since in the aftermath of Midway U.S. strategic emphasis shifted south into MacArthur's Southwest Pacific theater.

After mid-1942 and throughout most of 1943, relative calm reigned over the Central Pacific while U.S. forces fought their way through the bloody campaigns of Papua, Guadalcanal, and New Guinea in the Southwest Pacific. During this period the *Imperial Japanese Navy* and Japanese merchant vessels roamed freely through the Central Pacific soon, subject only to periodic attacks by Pacific Fleet submarines, which were taking an ever-increasing toll of enemy ships. The Japanese garrisons scattered throughout Micronesia built airstrips and prepared their defenses for the day when the Americans would resume their offensive. Even as the Japanese were consolidating their gains in the Central Pacific, however, American planners were at work both at Pearl Harbor and in Washington preparing for an offensive that would take advantage of the changes brought by the Battle of Midway.

At the May 1943 Trident Conference, British and American leaders approved a strategic plan for an offensive drive toward Japan through the Central Pacific. Although the plan clearly stipulated that the main effort in the American westward drive would be through the Central Pacific, not everyone agreed that this was the

best course of action. MacArthur especially had grave doubts about the wisdom of giving the Central Pacific priority over his planned drive to isolate Rabaul in the Southwest Pacific. The planners in Washington spent the months of June and July 1943 trying to reconcile the various points of view. At first they proposed an invasion of the Marshall Islands in October using battle-tested Marine divisions, but MacArthur pointed out that the only experienced amphibious assault troops available were those in the Southwest Pacific Area. Using them would delay the beginning of Operation CARTWHEEL, the campaign against Rabaul. The Combined Chiefs of Staff and the Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed with MacArthur that CARTWHEEL, should not be delayed, but at the same time they wanted to launch a drive through the Central Pacific soon.

A compromise was finally reached. Admiral Nimitz would begin a ground offensive in the Central Pacific, but it would be limited initially to a two-division invasion of the Gilbert Islands to develop airfields and facilities in support of a later operation in the Marshalls. On 20 July 1943, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed Nimitz to seize bases on the Gilbert Islands and on the island of Naura, west of the Gilberts.

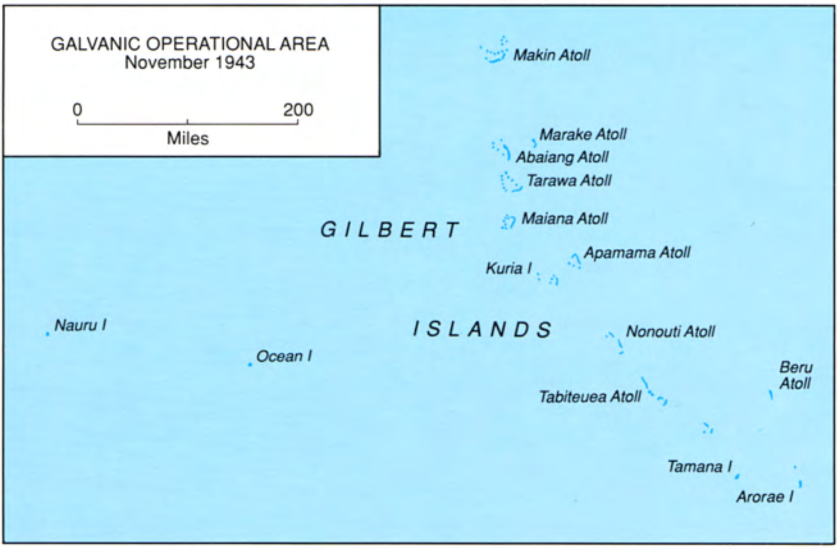
With the decision to invade the Gilberts, the matter of Nimitz's command and staff arrangements came under closer scrutiny. General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the Army, argued for a truly joint staff, with Army and Navy officers integrated throughout, and for the appointment of separate commanders for the Pacific Fleet and the Central Pacific Area to allow Nimitz to concentrate on his responsibilities as the POA commander. But if Nimitz relinquished command of the Pacific Fleet, his relationship to the Chief of Naval Operations and the Commander in Chief, United States Fleet, Admiral Ernest J. King, would significantly change, for he would no longer be directly responsible to King. Such an arrangement would also limit King's control, since he would be able to deal with Nimitz only as Chief of Naval Operations, a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, not as Commander in Chief, United States Fleet. The former was a staff relationship, while the latter was a much stronger command relationship. Admiral King insisted that Nimitz be continued in his multiple command roles, but, as though to soften his position, he explained that he had already taken steps to ensure greater Army participation in the CINCPOA staff.

Nimitz succeeded in retaining his command positions, but he also established a Central Pacific Force to plan and conduct the Gilbert Islands offensive, a command he gave to Rear Adm. Raymond A. Spruance, his former chief of staff. The new Central Pacific Force


THE PACIFIC
AND ADJACENT THEATERS
1942
Japanese Limit of Advance
0
1600
Miles at the Equator
UNION OF SOVIET
SOCIALIST REPUBLICS
USSR
MONGOLIA
MANCHURIA
CHINA
KOREA
TIBET
NEPAL
BHUTAN
INDIA
BURMA
FORMOSA
Hong Kong
SOUTHWEST PACIFIC AREA
SOUTH
CHINA
SEA
LUZON
PHILIPPINES
THAILAND
FRENCH
INDOCHINA
AUG 42
JUN 42
MINDANAO
PALAU
ISLANDS
NORTH
BORNEO
SARAWAK
MALAYA
Singapore
SUMATRA
BORNEO
CELEBES
NETHERLANDS INDIES
JAVA
MAY 42
AUG 42
INDIAN
OCEAN
SOUTHEAST ASIA COMMAND
AUSTRALIA
120°
140°
60°
100°
40°
20°
0°
20°
80°
100°
120°
140°



USSR
BERING SEA
160°
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AUG 42
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ALEUTIAN ISLANDS
MAY 42
NORTH PACIFIC AREA
CENTRAL PACIFIC AREA
JUN 42
PACIFIC
OCEAN
Battle of Midway
MIDWAY ISLANDS
HAWAIIAN ISLANDS
Pearl Harbor Strike
MARIANA ISLANDS
Guam
Truk
CAROLINE ISLANDS
MARSHALL ISLANDS
AUG 42
Makin
GILBERT ISLANDS
Canton
BISMARCK ARCHIPELAGO
SOUTH PACIFIC AREA
SOLOMON ISLANDS
MAY 42
ELLICE ISLANDS
Guadalcanal
Battle of Coral Sea
CORAL SEA
NEW HEBRIDES
FIJI ISLANDS
TONGA ISLANDS
NEW CALEDONIA
160°
180°
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had three major commands subordinate to it: the Fifth Amphibious Force, the Carrier Force, and the Defense and Shore-Based Air Force, all headed by Navy admirals. However, the Fifth Amphibious Force did have a separate ground headquarters, the V Amphibious Corps, commanded by Marine Maj. Gen. Holland M. Smith. The question of Nimitz's joint staff would continue to be a matter of debate, even after 6 September when Admiral Spruance announced the establishment of a joint staff for his Central Pacific Force. The joint staff consisted of Army and Navy officers organized into four sections: Plans, Operations, Intelligence, and Logistics. The first two were to be headed by Navy officers, the second two by Army officers. Nimitz did not alter his own multiple command responsibilities, which remained an unresolved interservice issue in the region.

During the preparation for taking the offensive in the Central Pacific, U.S. forces sought to engage the Japanese in minor offensive actions whenever possible. One of these early desultory actions had both unforeseen and unfortunate results. On 17 August 1942, the 2d Marine Raider Battalion, consisting of 221 marines, landed on Makin, one of the Gilberts' small atolls. Early in the morning the men disembarked from two submarines, climbed into rubber boats powered by outboard motors, and landed on the southern coast of Butaritari, the largest island in the Makin Atoll. During a day of sporadic firefights the marines succeeded in killing a number of the



The 27th Infantry Division trains in Hawaii before embarking on the amphibious operation to seize Makin in the Gilbert Islands. (DA photograph)

Japanese defenders. The chief Japanese response was from the air. A total of three air raids were flown against the marines from Japanese bases in the Marshall Islands to the north. Although there was actually very little Japanese resistance on the ground, the expedition cost the lives of 30 marines, 21 during the raid itself, the other 9 captured and later beheaded.

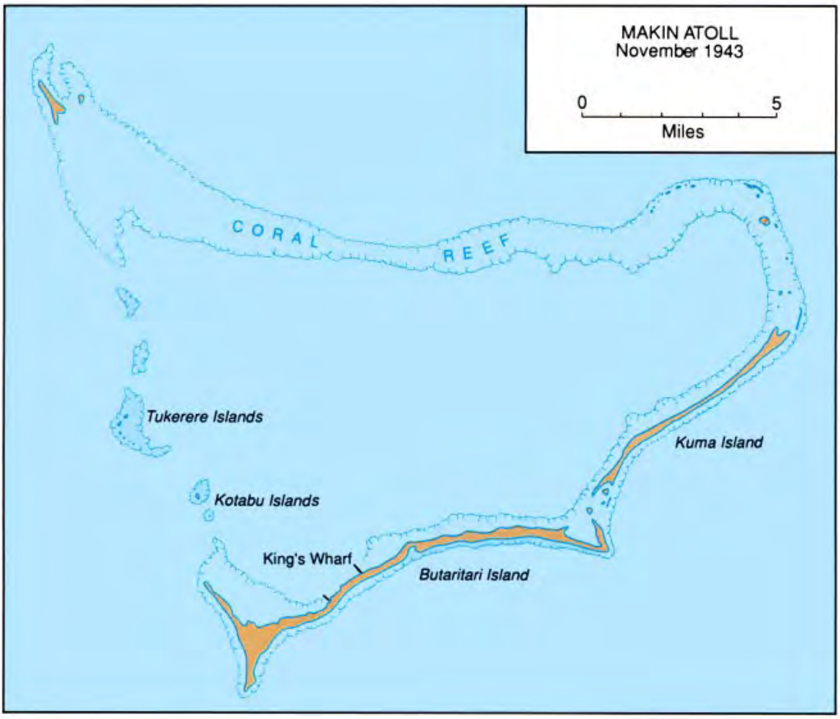
In retrospect the entire expedition appears to have been ill advised. Although the primary purpose of this raid was to confuse the Japanese and cause them to divert forces that might otherwise be assigned to Guadalcanal in the southern Pacific, where the Allies were also preparing to go on the offensive, there is no evidence that the raid was of any significant or lasting value to the Allied effort. On the contrary, there is good reason to believe that it induced the Japanese to commit far heavier forces to the defense of the Gilberts than they had originally contemplated. Before the August raid the only military personnel the Japanese maintained south of the Marshalls was the small force on Makin. Immediately after the raid they began a buildup of forces in the area that eventually resulted in several new island strongholds, all controlled by an efficient, centralized

base force command. Before they were finished they had also drawn in new troops from the Marshalls, the Carolines, and the home islands of Japan. Rather than contributing to the progress of American forces across the Central Pacific, the August 1942 raid on Makin actually made it more difficult when, ironically, Makin became one of the first U.S. targets in the Central Pacific Campaign.

Operation GALVANIC, a joint Army and Marine assault to capture Tarawa and Apamama in the Gilberts and Nauru, an island located about 390 miles to the west, was initially scheduled for 15 November 1943. The first two objectives were designated Marine Corps responsibilities, while the last would be the Army's first action in the Central Pacific Campaign. Plans initially called for a two-division Marine force, but to use the 1st Marine Division would have jeopardized SWPA's timetable for CARTWHEEL and was adamantly opposed by MacArthur. Even though the 27th Infantry Division, now in Hawaii, had not yet received any amphibious training, General Marshall offered it to King for GALVANIC. King agreed, and the division received instructions to begin planning for an assault on Nauru Island. For the next two months the division, whose part in GALVANIC was code-named KOURBASH, centered its planning on Nauru. Then Admiral Spruance decided that the capture of Nauru, with its well-entrenched defenders, would require more troops than available naval transport could move. As a result, Nimitz approved Spruance's recommendation that the Japanese seaplane base at Makin be substituted for Nauru as the objective for the 27th Division, which learned of the decision only on 28 September, less than eight weeks before the scheduled assault.

The attack on the Gilbert Islands would be the first experience in amphibious operations for United States forces in the Central Pacific, and the transition from a defensive to an offensive role required many adjustments in organization and attitude. Preparations were especially complicated since the major assault units were from different services and widely separated, with the 27th Infantry Division still in Hawaii and the 2d Marine Division training in New Zealand.

Every aspect of the GALVANIC operation had to be anticipated because once the landing forces arrived at their objectives, over 2,000 miles from Hawaii, they had to win with whatever logistical support they had brought with them. For GALVANIC, Nimitz had at his disposal the bulk of the Pacific Fleet, the Fleet Marine Force, and the Army's Seventh Air Force, as well as Army combat and logistical support units from the greatly expanded Hawaiian Department. For its part, the Army was expected to furnish not only the as-



sault element for Makin, but also the land-based aircraft, logistical support, and part of the garrison force. From Nimitz's point of view the problems associated with preparing for the Gilbert operation were exacerbated by the requirement to continue the offensive into the Marshalls two months later. Many of the naval vessels used in GALVANIC could be used later, but assembling additional expendable supplies and preparing fresh assault forces would be extremely difficult in such a short time. In effect the CINCPOA staff, newly organized as a joint headquarters with no experience in conducting amphibious assaults, had to assemble, concurrently, two separate task forces for two different invasions.

During the planning and preparation for GALVANIC, the 27th Infantry and 2d Marine Divisions were subordinate to the V Amphibious Corps, although in the invasion itself their commanders would both report to their respective naval task force commanders. In either case the 27th Division had no Army officer in the chain of command that stretched back to Admiral Nimitz. It was subordinate



Troops of the 2d Battalion, 165th Infantry, struggle to shore on Yellow Beach on Butaritari Island following a naval gunfire bombardment. (DA photograph)

to a Marine headquarters during the planning phase and to a Navy headquarters during the assault itself.

Although its previous planning for an assault on Nauru was not entirely wasted as a result of the change in objective, the 27th Division did not have much time to get ready for its combat debut. The division's assault force, known as the Northern Landing Force, was limited to one regimental combat team. The combat team was built around the 165th Infantry, reinforced by the 3d Battalion of the 105th Infantry. The Northern Landing Force, which totaled some 6,500 men, also included the 105th Field Artillery Battalion, the 152d Engineer Battalion, the 193d Tank Battalion, and other supporting elements. Maj. Gen. Ralph L. Smith, the division commander, led the landing force using elements of his headquarters.

As planning for Makin and Tarawa continued, Nimitz organized air support for the amphibious operations. By early September U.S. forces had 5 Central Pacific airfields within bombing range of the Gilbert Islands: 3 (Funafuti, Nukufetau, and Nanomea) in the Ellice Islands and 1 each on Canton and Baker Islands. Plans called for

U.S. air power launched from these airfields to soften up Makin and Tarawa before the Army and Marine assault waves hit the beaches.

Rehearsals for the operation began in late October. Army units for the Northern Attack Force (part of Task Force 52) practiced amphibious assaults in Hawaii and, a week later, the marines of the Southern Attack Force (Task Force 53) in the New Hebrides. With this phase completed, all the units sailed to the objective area where by the night of 19 November a vast armada of warships, cargo vessels, transports, and other craft were in their assigned positions.

Meanwhile air operations had begun in earnest. Between 13 and 17 November, heavy bombers from the Seventh Air Force had flown 141 sorties against both the Gilbert and the Marshall Islands, dropping 173 tons of bombs. On 19 November land-based and carrier-based aircraft joined for the final sorties. During the early morning hours of the 20th, the battleships and heavy cruisers began their preinvasion bombardment, the carriers sent their planes into the air to bomb and strafe the beaches, and the transports took their assigned stations to begin debarking the assault troops.

Makin Atoll, roughly triangular in shape, is an irregular formation of reefs and islands around a large lagoon. Its dominant land feature is Butaritari Island, a long ribbon-shaped landmass fishtailing at its western end in a shallow curve. The average width of the island between the ocean and the lagoon is only about eight-tenths of a mile and in some places much less.

The invasion plan for the Northern Task Force was relatively complex for such a small objective, especially since this was its first amphibious assault. The plan called for landing on two beaches, one on each side of Butaritari: RED Beach on the ocean side, YELLOW Beach on the lagoon. Not only was the landing force split, but the landings were to take place sequentially with a two-hour delay between the initial landings on RED Beach and the later assault on YELLOW Beach.

When Task Force 52 approached Makin the Japanese offered little opposition. A few land-based planes made ineffective passes, but the *Japanese Combined Fleet* at Truk was not involved. With 173 of its carrier-based planes and a force of heavy cruisers detailed since the beginning of November to the defense of Rabaul, the *Combined Fleet* remained a spectator to the action in the Gilberts. This did not mean, however, that the Japanese were without resources in the area. Aircraft from fields in the Gilberts and the Marshalls were capable of hitting Makin and Tarawa, and the submarines at Truk were capable of wreaking havoc on the transports of the invasion force.



Soldiers from the shore party rest on Yellow Beach afer the successful assault. (DA photograph)

Largely as a result of the earlier U.S. Marine raid on Makin, the Japanese had garrisoned Butaritari as a seaplane base with a total strength of about 800 men by the time of the 27th Division landings. The actual combat strength was considerably less, however, since most of the troops were construction workers from Korea or ground crews assigned to service the seaplanes. Japanese combat troops numbered only about 300, and their prepared defenses were minimal. The defensive perimeter around the seaplane base on Butaritari Island consisted mainly of dual-purpose 8-cm. guns and a few machine guns. The island also boasted two tank-barrier systems, one on each side of the seaplane base around King's Wharf. Although not particularly formidable, these barriers stretched across the narrow island.

The initial landings on RED Beach went pretty much according to plan with the assault troops moving rapidly inland after an uneventful trip on the ocean side of the island. Their progress off the beach was slowed only by an occasional sniper and the need to negotiate their way around the debris and water-filled craters left by the air and naval bombardment. The troops on YELLOW Beach, however, experienced a rather different reception.

As the landing craft approached YELLOW Beach from the lagoon, they began to receive small-arms and machine-gun fire from the island's defenders. The assault troops were also surprised to learn that even though they were approaching the beach at high tide as planned, a miscalculation of the depth of the lagoon caused their small boats to go aground, forcing them to cover the final 250 yards to the beach in waist-deep water. Although equipment and weapons were lost or water-soaked, only three men were killed approaching the beach, mainly because the defenders had elected to make their final stand not at the waterline, but farther inland along the tank barriers.

The invasion plan was conceived in the hope of luring the enemy into committing most of its forces to oppose the first landings on RED Beach and thereby allow the troops landing on YELLOW Beach to attack from the rear. The enemy, however, did not respond to the attack on RED Beach and withdrew from YELLOW Beach with only harassing fires, leaving the troops of the 27th Division no choice but to knock out the fortified strongpoints one by one. Two days of determined fighting reduced enemy resistance to the point that the issue was no longer in doubt. After clearing the entire atoll, the 27th Division commander, Maj. Gen. Ralph C. Smith, reported on 23 November, "Makin taken." In the end the most difficult problem in capturing Makin, as one might have expected, was coordinating the actions of the two separate landing forces, a problem made more difficult because the defenders did not respond as had been anticipated.

While the Army sought to solve its coordination problems at Makin, the marines had their hands full at Tarawa. Tarawa, where the defenders were more numerous and the fortifications stronger, was the objective of Task Force 53. The Japanese force numbered about 4,800 men, more than half effective combat troops. The island itself had been converted into a veritable fortress ringed with beach defenses equipped with 13-mm. and 7.7-mm. guns. Log and concrete obstacles had been emplaced, along with additional obstacles and double-apron, low-wire fences in the water. A large array of guns ranging in size from 13-mm. to 8-inch and seven tanks completed the armament. Of all the beaches assaulted during World War II, only Iwo Jima was more strongly defended than Tarawa.

The complete occupation of Makin took four days and actually cost more in naval casualties than in ground troops. Despite its great superiority in men and weapons, the 27th Division had considerable difficulty subduing the island's small defensive force. As compared

to an estimated 395 killed in action, American combat casualties numbered 218 (66 killed and 152 wounded), a ratio of 6 to 1. But when the American losses incurred during the sinking of the escort carrier *Liscome Bay* on 24 December by a Japanese submarine are included, the loss balance tips toward the other side. Counting the 642 sailors who went down with the carrier, American casualties exceeded the strength of the entire Japanese garrison on Makin.

While Task Force 52 was having its troubles on Makin, the marines of Task Force 53 were locked in a grim and deadly struggle on Tarawa, one of the toughest fights the Marine Corps experienced in its long history. In the same amount of time it took the 27th Division to capture Makin, the 2d Marine Division followed a simple assault plan that concentrated its units to storm the heavily fortified beaches of Tarawa, reduce the cement and steel emplacements, and kill virtually every Japanese soldier on the island. The cost was horrific. The division took 3,301 casualties, of which over 1,000 were killed in action or later died of wounds.

Although by 23 November, as the 27th Division began to depart Makin, the marines on Tarawa had finished the heaviest fighting, it took six more days before they finally overcame all enemy resistance.

The Central Pacific Campaign finally ended on 6 December 1943, exactly two years after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. By this time in the war, however, it was the Japanese who were desperately looking for enough men and equipment to carry on the fight.

Analysis

The Central Pacific Campaign, one of the longest in World War II, had a clear and definite beginning with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Its termination on 6 December 1943, however, was apparently determined more by a desire to make it a tidy two-year campaign than by the attainment of any particular strategic objective. The campaign was mainly defensive, although the Battle of Midway and Operation GALVANIC were notable offensive operations. The former finally brought the Japanese offensive to a halt, and the latter marked the opening of the American drive across the Pacific that would eventually end the war.

Although not a strategic objective in itself, the capture of Makin and Tarawa, which occurred in the last weeks of the campaign, was the first real step toward carrying the Allied offensive in the Pacific to the Japanese homeland. Later the commander of the V Amphibious Corps would declare that Tarawa, with its "terrible loss of

life," had "no particular strategic importance," but most of his colleagues agreed that from both the strategic and tactical perspectives the invasion of the Gilberts was well worth the effort. Without the advance bases in the Gilberts, the later operations against the Marshalls would have been much more difficult, if not impossible.

From the tactical perspective the landings on Makin and Tarawa were an important testing ground for American amphibious doctrine. Avoidable errors and omissions of execution were carefully noted and studied by all echelons of command involved in GALVANIC and steps were taken to avoid their repetition in future amphibious landings. For example, the complexity of the 27th Division assault plan stood in stark contrast to the simplicity of the 2d Marine Division's plan, and future Pacific landings did not split the assault force between widely separated beaches. These landings confirmed that the basic techniques, tactics, and procedures were workable even under the most demanding situations. From a wider perspective, the success of the GALVANIC operation demonstrated that naval task forces had the capability to control an area and to remain in that area during the assault and initial consolidation of its land objective with an acceptable level of losses. This capability became the cornerstone of American offensive operations in the Pacific.

The war went on for almost two years after the Central Pacific Campaign ended, but the groundwork laid during the campaign was significant to the ultimate Allied victory. While the campaign was not marked by a series of battles leading to a grand finale, it does reflect the education of the American armed forces as they pulled themselves out of the despair of Pearl Harbor toward victory.

CENTRAL PACIFIC 1941–1943

Further Readings

There is no single source that covers the Army's role in the Central Pacific Campaign in detail; however, three volumes in the Army's official history of World War II do contain a substantial amount of information on the campaign. Stetson Conn, Rose C. Engelman, and Byron Fairchild, *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts* (1964), provides the background for the status of the Hawaiian Department prior to Pearl Harbor. Louis Morton's *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (1962), gives an overview of the planning and the command relationships in the Pacific theater. How the battle of Makin fits into the overall campaign is covered in Philip A. Crowl and Edmund G. Love, *Seizure of the Gilberts and Marshalls* (1955). *Makin* (1990), a study first printed in 1946 in the American Forces in Action series, goes into some detail about the battle.

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Cover: *Section of the west tank trap on Butaritari Island*
(DA photograph)

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